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BOOKS

GROUNDNS FOR MILD ASSURANCE

1946: SECOND YEAR BOOK OF THE ARTS IN NEW ZEALAND. 132 pp. Edited by Howard Wadman, Wellington. H. H. Tombs Ltd.

(Reviewed by J. C. Beaglehole)

I START off with the not very profound or far-reaching remark that this is a very difficult book to review. The difficulty, I think, is not altogether due to my own shortcomings; it is due also to the variety, or lack of precise direction, in the book itself. It is an interesting book, and a book worth publishing; but what exactly is it driving at? Is the fact that it has three different titles—one on the title-page, another on the dust-jacket front, a third on the spine—symptomatic of something? True, that fact is trivial; but we get another line in the first two paragraphs of the editor's preface. He did ask himself, up to a point, what he was driving at—"a representative showing of current New Zealand work in the arts, or . . . a prejudiced selection of what appeals to us." Why "prejudiced?" Is any expression of the critical faculty necessarily prejudiced? "It may be timidity, or it may be a British sense of fair play struggling against aesthetic judgment that has prompted us to attempt both these courses." Now, is Mr. Wadman asking us to believe that he deliberately set out to be prejudiced, that he equates prejudice with aesthetic judgment, and also that he deliberately set out to be unprejudiced, that is, British, that is, representative? I don't think we can regard him as timid. Is the secret in his next sentence? "It is our policy to accept work of all types and traditions so long as it is good of its kind, and then by arrangement and emphasis to promote those kinds that we believe to be healthful and valid for our time."

That is frank enough, but may not some people think it open to the charge of prejudice—a frank sort of low cunning? And if work isn't "healthful" and "valid for our time" should it anyhow be reproduced? I'm not just picking on Mr. Wadman—I think his short preface is worth reading; but I also think it's worth arguing about at greater length than there is room for here.

WELL, we get 60 or 70 pages of reproductions of pictures of various sorts, paintings, and wood-engravings and lino-cuts and domestic architecture, without critical commentary except of the implied sort of which Mr. Wadman has so pleasantly warned us; then an avowedly critical series of commentaries on drama in the four centres during the year. This is very good, and tells us something we want to know—which the accompanying pictures really don't (except Sam Williams's lantern slides—here is a talent our theatre should grapple to its bosom); but have we got away from the determined, albeit somewhat subtle, lack of prejudice of the art section? Then we get a gnomic article on poetry in New Zealand by James K. Baxter. Mr. Baxter writes very good

sentences; but, again, what exactly, or how many things, is he driving at? I confess I don't know.

Mr. Fairburn's selection of the year's verse follows. I take it he has followed some critical principle, and, being Mr. Fairburn, has not been too determinedly catholic. And then, if one hasn't already read it, one can turn back to E. H. McCormick's cool, thoroughly reasonable, illuminating introductory essay, the title of which I have appropriated for this review.

As for the pictures, they do give us a pretty good idea of what is being done (Mr. Wadman justified); and together with the same damned old scenery done in the same damned old way we do get things like George Woods's really magnificent aquatint *Mamu* (only half-tone doesn't do it justice), and Roy Stenberg's drawings and Elise Mourant's delightful conté and wash street scene, and a good selection of the Rutland group; and the strength of Colin McCahon and the firm structure of the Toles; and a good many other bits of work that may, I take it, be deemed "healthful and valid for our time." But (confound these buts, they will keep stepping in) the selection is not always suitable for black and white reproduction; the reproduction makes chaos of the Louise Henderson and Joan Lillicrap oils, it does no good to many other oils, it does grave damage to the McCormack and Helen Brown watercolours, and most of the still-lives. I know only too well the difficulties, and I sympathise; the reproduction of poems is much simpler. Of the colour work, the lino-cuts naturally come off best; the Lee Johnson is of course the most interesting.

WELL, then, precisely what is this review, in its turn, driving at? It seems to have blown hot and cold—or at least warm and cold. It is honestly trying not to damn with faint praise. The word "interesting," as used, means interesting and not boring. On the whole, I think, it is driving at this—that the Year Book is the sort of thing that is worth doing, and that it deserves well of the commonwealth; but that anything of the sort, to realise its greatest potential value, needs to be firmly grounded on a set of clearly thought out critical convictions, that those critical convictions should be explicit as well as implicit, frank and all-pervading, quite willing to damn as well as exalt, and to damn with force and comprehension. Of course, not universal damning; that would be stultifying and silly. If the arts in New Zealand are to flourish in an adult way, then we desperately need criticism as a working partner of creation—as a partner working hard. We need values, rational and emotional; we need values erected into some sort of philosophy; we need hard thought as well as a box of paints, and hard thought is less attractive than a box of paints. Meanwhile, considering the arts in New Zealand as they are today, those of them that can get between the covers of a book, we do have in this book grounds for mild assurance; mild, but—yes—assurance.